

Listening to Vocational Rehabilitation Leaders: Practice and Policy Recommendations for Higher Education/Vocational Rehabilitation Partnerships

By Jaclyn Camden, Hannah Ramsey, and Dana Yarbrough

Introduction

In the United States, the employment rate for people with intellectual disability is alarmingly low, hovering at or below 20% (National Core Indicators, 2022).

An emerging pathway to employment for youth and adults with intellectual disability is higher education. Inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) is a field of study focused on developing, expanding, and improving higher education options for students with intellectual disability, who are enrolling in a college or university with peers with or without disabilities in pursuit of a career. In 2023, over 300 colleges and universities enrolled students with intellectual disability in programs aimed at enhancing employment outcomes. Vocational rehabilitation (VR) is a critical partner in many of these programs. However, the level and nature of collaboration between VR and higher education programs for students with intellectual disability varies significantly across programs and from state to state.

The Employment Partnerships Workgroup, supported by the Think College Inclusive Higher Education

Network, held a listening session with state leaders from five VR agencies representing diverse geographic locations, sizes, and demographics in February 2023 to better understand the successes and challenges related to partnering with higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. Facilitators asked VR state leaders questions about barriers and needs related to their state VR agency partnering with these programs. Facilitators also asked about positive outcomes or relationships built with programs and what practices lead to students with intellectual disability achieving paid employment.

This brief summarizes key issues shared in the listening session and offers VR state leaders' recommendations on facilitating stronger partnerships between state VR agencies and higher education programs to increase access to and opportunities for paid employment for students with intellectual disability.

FIVE KEY ISSUES

- #1. Language Barriers between the Systems
- #2. Need for More and Better Communication between VR and Program Staff
- #3. Lack of Awareness and Understanding of Respective Systems, Practices, and Associated Federal and State Guidance
- #4. Need for Creative Solutions to Funding and Cross-System Partnerships
- #5. Need for Goal Alignment and Employment-focused Programming

#1

Language Barriers between the Systems

Issue:

- Different use and understanding of terminology and language in the higher education and VR systems

**Recommendations:**

- VR staff must understand the terminology used within higher education programs for students with intellectual disability.
- Program staff should seek to understand VR language and terminology, including VR services and support structures.

"When agencies and institutes of higher education come together, there's sometimes a language or terminology barrier."

#2

Need for More and Better Communication between VR and Program Staff

Issues:

- Lack of accurate communication within and between VR entities and with higher education programs cross-system partners (higher education program staff and VR) and internal VR staff (administrators/managers and counselors)
- Absence of consistent and timely communication between VR counselors and higher education program staff



"I work very closely with the Transition Coordinator at VR. There's now a pretty standard contract that is [put in place] with all of our programs, and that has been working very well."

Recommendations:

- Be intentional with communication. VR and higher education program staff should establish critical communication touchpoints to support strong partnerships, including before the student is accepted into the program, before significant changes (e.g., career goals, semester plans), and when accomplishments occur during or at the conclusion of a semester.
- Establish a contract clearly outlining the expectations to ensure VR and higher education program staff understand expected touchpoints and responsibilities.

"... that's the hardest thing, making sure that communication is happening, because sometimes that's where we can fall short...just that constant communication between the counselor and program, the transition counselor, and then the designated agency that will be [supporting] the person when they exit the postsecondary program."

#3

Lack of Awareness and Understanding of Respective Systems, Practices, and Associated Federal and State Guidance

Issues:

- VR counselors and administrators' lack of knowledge about higher education programs for students with intellectual disability within their state and nationally
- Higher education program staff's limited knowledge of VR structures and services
- VR staff's inconsistent understanding of federal and state guidance and policies
- Low expectations and understanding of students with intellectual disability attending higher education

Recommendations:

- Develop comprehensive national, regional, and state-level public awareness and information on IPSE and the specific programs, including program activities, outcomes, and ideal student candidates.
- Create internal VR training on policies and guidelines that impact and support higher education access for students with intellectual disability.
- Challenge the preconceived assumptions of what someone with intellectual disability can do and align with the idea of progressive employment and education.
- Provide students with intellectual disability access to counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or post-secondary education programs at institutions of higher education through Pre-Employment Transition Services.
- Review and clarify current federal and state guidance on how existing regulations impact VR's support of higher education programs for students with intellectual disability.



"Not as many people know about these options [IPSE] as we would like. Sometimes folks make assumptions about who can go to a postsecondary education program."

"One of our major issues, is staff being aware that we are able to pay for these programs and services... The staff turnover [is an issue]. [As a] new counselor, it takes a while to learn what we're able to do. So we're just working internally on helping staff be more aware of what's available."

"And so, the importance of ensuring that everybody has an opportunity to access, when there are opportunities that look at postsecondary options...that we're considering everybody in the mix."

#4

Need for Creative Solutions to Funding and Cross-System Partnerships

Issues:

- Lack of stable funding options for students with intellectual disability to attend higher education programs
- Inability of VR to cover the total costs of programs throughout their state
- Need for cross-system collaboration between agencies for braided or blended funding to support access to and employment in higher education programs.

Recommendations:

- Discuss braided or blended funding options by working closely with the state Developmental Disabilities Agency, Developmental Disabilities Council, and Department of Education about funding and scholarship ideas.
- Bring all collaborative employment partners to the table to discuss cross-system funding and support.
- State VR agencies can look internally at various authorized services and funding streams that align with higher education, including Pre-Employment Transition Services.



“One thing that I wanted to mention is the funding system. It doesn’t necessarily support this without a lot of creativity.”

“To have that guidance [from other agencies and programs], like ‘here’s what’s worked for us, here’s what’s good to stay away from, here’s how to market and get funding’ – those overall partnerships make a difference.”



“One huge barrier is always going to be around funding. So, in our particular state, there was a period where VR was the sole funding source. That wasn’t sustainable.”

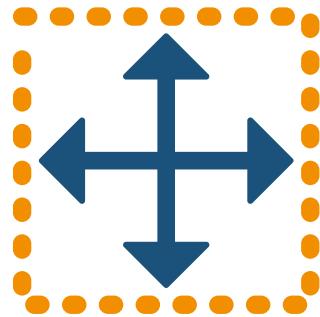
#5 Need for Goal Alignment and Employment-focused Programming

Issues:

- Not all higher education programs for students with intellectual disability are focused on employment or have clear employment goals, though it is considered a best practice in the field
- Lack of alignment between the Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) established with VR counselor and the employment experiences within a higher education program
- VR counselor's lack of willingness for the IPE to be updated as career goals and interests change
- Inadequate information sharing of program and national employment outcomes

Recommendations:

- Higher education programs must include interest-driven employment opportunities for students.
- Collect and disseminate current employment outcomes and strategies within the higher education program that aligns with VR initiatives and goals.
- VR agencies should investigate the employment benefits of students with intellectual disability attending higher education and understand the research and outcomes of programs within the state and nationally.
- Develop higher education programs that incorporate employment and are focused on competitive integrated employment outcomes.



"When putting a plan in place with the individual through VR, we look at what employment goal are we listing? As they're going through higher education and once they finish the program, we are looking at what kinds of jobs they're actually getting compared to their career goals. We're seeing some conflicting information."

"A focus on employment is definitely key. When you're bringing up anything, you have to relay how it will result in employment outcomes, so that language is important."

Policy Implications and Recommendations to Federal and State Funders

VR representatives in the listening session identified several policy gaps at the federal and state level. Here are some additional recommendations from VR administrators and Employment Partnership Collaborative Workgroup members to address gaps in guidance and funding that serve as barriers to stronger and more effective VR and higher education program partnerships.

Recommendations:

- 1) Update federal guidance to address the intent and alignment of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to support better postsecondary education access for students with intellectual disability. This guidance should provide a comprehensive framework and seamless approach for VR agencies to facilitate postsecondary education awareness and opportunities for students with intellectual disability.
- 2) Allocate additional state-level funding to support access to higher education programs for students with intellectual disability, including:
 - » increased VR state agency funding directed to the support of these programs
 - » braided funding options to pool resources from multiple agencies (e.g., Developmental Disability agencies) to maximize financial support for these programs
 - » state legislative funding that guarantees a sufficient financial stream to sustain and expand these programs
- 3) Implement a streamlined and comprehensive data collection process allowing for clearer documentation of competitive integrated employment outcomes resulting from the obtainment of a program credential.
- 4) Establish and fund grant initiatives to develop a statewide pilot to enhance collaboration between VR and higher education programs for students with intellectual disability. Statewide infrastructure creates internal consistency between offices, equitable access for people with intellectual disability interested in enrolling in higher education programs, and alignment for VR counselors who work in multiple service areas.
- 5) Expand access to Pre-Employment Transition Services funds for students enrolled in higher education programs.

For more information on IPSE and the collaboration with VR, [visit Think College's resource page about Vocational Rehabilitation](#).

The Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network's (thinkcollege.net/projects/tcn) Employment Partnerships Workgroup was convened to address barriers and promote effective collaboration between higher education programs for students with intellectual disability and employment partners. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) facilitates the workgroup, which is composed of employers, VR staff, higher education program staff, higher education students and graduates, and other organizations.

The workgroup hosted a listening session for state VR leaders. For a full summary of the discussion and issues, see [Insight Brief 59: State Vocational Rehabilitation Leaders' Perspectives on Partnering with Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability](#).

INSIGHT ISSUE NO. 59
A Think College Brief on Policy, Research, & Practice
State Vocational Rehabilitation Leaders' Perspectives on Partnering with Higher Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability
By Jaclyn Camden, Hannah Ramsey, and Dana Yarbrough

Introduction
Nationally, the employment rate of people with intellectual disability is only around 39%. In comparison, the employment rate for people without disabilities is 63% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Higher education is a growing employer that can support vocational rehabilitation (VR) partners in addressing employment challenges for students with or without disabilities in pursuit of a career. VR and higher education programs for individuals with intellectual disability have been working together to support postsecondary paid employment for people with disabilities. Grigal et al. (2022) reported during 2021–2022, almost 60% of students with intellectual disability who graduated from a postsecondary program with Intellectual Disability (TPSD) program were working at or within 90 days of graduation. This fact highlights how higher education programs for students with intellectual disability have the potential to support VR partners in addressing employment challenges.

State VR agencies are critical partners to higher education programs, as they support postsecondary students with disabilities to find employment opportunities. VR agencies have partnered with them by providing financial assistance and job coaches and leveraging their business networks to help students access employment opportunities at a variety of locations. VR agencies also provide training and resources from the VR agency to even program to program (Lee et al., 2018).

In this brief, we describe the listening session and provide recommendations for future partnership, along with recommendations for improving practice. The information gleaned from the listening session adds to the call for continued collaboration and partnerships between state VR agencies and higher education programs to support postsecondary paid employment for people with intellectual disability. This brief concludes with a summary of what this information guides the Workgroup's future efforts in developing resources and training highlighting successful partnerships and addressing barriers.



REFERENCES

National Core Indicators (2022). Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities 2020–21 In-Person Survey (IPS): Work. National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services and Human Services Research Institute. https://idd.nationalcoreindicators.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IPS_2020-21_4_Employment.pdf

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INSIGHT, Issue No. 58, 2024

This is a publication of the Think College Inclusive Higher Education Network at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston, funded by the Office of Postsecondary Education (Grant No. P407C210001). The opinions contained in this document are those of the grantee and do not necessarily reflect those of the funders.



Recommended citation: Camden, J., Ramsey, H., and Yarborough, D. (2024).

Listening to Vocational Rehabilitation Leaders: Practice and Policy Recommendations for Higher Education/Vocational Rehabilitation Partnerships. Think College Insight Brief No. 58. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.